

Correspondence

Studies in Comparative Religion, Vol. 3, No. 2. (Spring, 1969) © World Wisdom, Inc.
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TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

Sir,

No, it is not true that "so long as a writer on religious subjects is affirming beliefs (whether his own or other people's) he is expressing the truth, but when depreciating other people's beliefs, his word is not to be trusted", for in that case the most erroneous sects, including Satanism, and the most absurd personal beliefs would be justified; the "discerning of spirits" of which the New Testament speaks would have no meaning. But perhaps the author of this remark is thinking somehow of the principle according to which a doctrinal pronouncement—not a metaphysical one but a dogmatic or moral one—may be perfectly valid within the framework of a given religion without necessarily being valid outside it and within the framework of another religion that is equally true in itself? However that may be, this principle does not apply to the case of Teilhard de Chardin, whose thesis on the genesis of man stands in opposition not only to the form and spirit of the Christian dogma, but also to all traditional wisdom. Let us say simply that this thesis is false, that it expresses no particle of transcendent truth. And how could it, seeing that it denies truth as such: according to Teilhard de Chardin, intelligence itself, including all that is deepest in it, all that is implicitly divine, is subject to change; it "evolves" together with the supposed evolution of matter, so that it could not have any fixed and immutable content; the spirit of man, according to Teilhard de Chardin, is entirely "in a state of becoming". It is here, moreover, that the Teilhardian thesis contradicts itself, for if human intelligence is no more than matter which has been in a state of progressive transformation ever since the age of the first molluscs, how could modern man, "half-developed" as he is, possibly take in, with the eye of his understanding, the whole movement which is carrying him along? How is it possible for the essentially impermanent to judge the nature of impermanence? This argument should be enough to condemn the Teilhardian thesis. It remains to be seen why it has so much success.

The average modern man "believes" above all in science—the science that has produced modern surgery and modern industry—and this is almost his basic "religion". If he considers himself a Christian at the same time, the two "beliefs" stand in opposition to each other in his soul, and engender a latent crisis which calls for a solution. This solution is what Teilhard de Chardin seems to bring. He "ties the two loose ends together"; but he does so, not by making as he should, the distinction between the different planes of reality—that of empirical knowledge which is exact in its way but necessarily fragmentary and provisional, and that of faith which is bound up with timeless certainties—but by mixing them inextricably together: he endows empirical science with

an absolute certainty that it does not and cannot have, and he projects the idea of indefinite progress into God Himself.

He puts forward the theory of the transformation of the species as a certain fact, whereas it is no more than a hypothesis as its most serious defenders admit; no valid proof of it has ever, in fact, been made, and if in spite of everything it keeps its hold, this is because modern minds can only conceive of a genesis which takes place in time; the "vertical" genesis of specific forms from the supraformal and animic degrees of existence is beyond them. None the less, scientific honesty demands that one should make a distinction between proof and hypothesis, and that one should not build, as Teilhard de Chardin, does, a whole philosophy—indeed, a pseudo-religion—on an entirely conjectural basis. It is not for nothing that Teilhard de Chardin was the victim of the famous Piltdown hoax—the Eoanthropus of unhappy memory—and that he was one of the inventors of the no less fantastic "Sinanthropus" of Chou-Kou-Tien! But the worst and most grotesque feature of Teilhardism is the fact that it is obliged to consider the prophets and sages of ancient times as being mentally "under-developed": are they not a little nearer to the ape than modern man is? It is true that in this respect the thesis of Teilhard de Chardin is in no sense original; its novelty lies in its being a Trojan horse to introduce materialism and progressism into the very bosom of the religion.

TITUS BURCKHARDT

Switzerland, 7.5.69

MAN AND THE PRESENCE OF EVIL

Sir,

I cannot answer Mr. Bolton's long and interesting letter on my article, *Man and the presence of evil in Christian and Platonic Doctrine*, because I don't think there is anything to answer; Mr. Bolton asserts what he calls the "complete principles" of "true metaphysics" and that is that. The only question to be asked, consequently, is not whether my interpretation of Christian or Platonic doctrine is right or wrong over particular points, but whether Mr. Bolton's complete principles of true metaphysics are right or wrong, or at least whether they can pretend to that absolute and overriding authority which Mr. Bolton attributes to them. Mr. Bolton's statement that "the ideas of emanation and creation are in no sense equal alternatives... the idea of creation relates to an altogether more relative point of view than that of emanation", will serve to illustrate what I mean. This statement presupposes the possession of certain principles of understanding which are derived from a doctrine that Mr. Bolton must claim is superior—metaphysically superior—to the Christian doctrine, because according to Christian doctrine it is the idea of emanation that is more relative than the idea of creation, and this is the reverse of what Mr. Bolton says is true. Similarly, his statement that finite being "*does not exist at all* (his italics) for the Infinite" must also derive from a doctrine which Mr. Bolton accepts as metaphysically superior to Christian doctrine, because of course Christian doctrine affirms a point of view which, it claims (mistakenly, Mr. Bolton would say, and certainly illogically), goes beyond the logical categories of

thought which produce that concept of "irreversibility" he has in mind. And so on, where the other arguments are concerned. It is so easy to appeal to "complete principles" of "true metaphysics" while forgetting that this appeal begs an endless number of questions. Ultimately the degree and firmness of the assent one gives to a particular doctrine depend not on any demonstrable probability or proof of its metaphysical superiority over another doctrine, but on the strength of one's acceptance of it, or faith in it, in the first place. That is why I cannot answer Mr. Bolton's letter without first going into the whole question of the nature and authority of the principles of the doctrine he asserts—obviously something that cannot be done in a letter.

PHILIP SHERRARD

Athens, 27.11.68

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

Humility is to walk according to the Truth.

St. Teresa of Avila.